Coming to the Manger to Find Joy

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 3:7-18

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Many of you would agree that these are difficult times. We are waging war on two fronts. Rather than a de-escalation of hostilities, for which most of us hoped, we know now that there will be another surge and an escalation of hostilities. We are also waging a domestic war around a variety of issues ranging from health care to gay rights to global warming. The economy is sagging, delaying retirement for some and forcing others back into the job market. Unemployment is at ten percent, thwarting the plans of many coming out of college and others looking for work. The H1N1 virus has us all on guard. And then Tiger Woods isn't all we thought he was.

And personally we've lost a lot this year. The deacons' grief worship last weekend reminded me that deep grief is just under the surface in our church. Many of us have lost loved ones this year. This is the first Advent and Christmas without them, and some of us feel like a wet blanket has been tossed across our shoulders.

And look at what we've done this morning. We have been so audacious as to light a pink candle and name it, of all things, *Joy*. We're either acting out an offensive ceremony, a superficial ritual, or a most powerful faith.

Yes, these are difficult times, but try to imagine the times of the prophet named Zephaniah. He's one of the prophets whose name we don't hear often. We know Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, but who was Zephaniah, and why do we hear him this Advent season? Zephaniah was actually a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, and like Jeremiah he preached a hard word to the people of Israel. Judgment was coming, he warned them. Blistering divine judgment was coming, and no one would escape it. His word to the people began this way:

"I will utterly sweep away
everything

from the face of the earth," says
the Lord.
"I will sweep away humans and
animals;
I will sweep away the birds of
the air
and the fish of the sea.
I will make the wicked stumble.
I will cut off humanity
from the face of the earth," says
the Lord.

That was Zephaniah's introduction, and frankly his message didn't get any better…until the end, our text for today. We know that the terrible judgment Zephaniah predicted came to pass. It was as awful as awful could be. Invading armies from the north, from Babylon, killed many of the people of Israel. Their homes and vineyards were ransacked. The Temple in Jerusalem was desecrated and then utterly destroyed. Those who survived this brutal invasion from the north were then forcibly taken into exile to the land of Babylon. There they languished, a forlorn and hopeless people.

The people of Israel must have thought Zephaniah to be a crazy man, a sheer lunatic. What he did was incongruous, even insulting. It flew into the face of their devastating circumstances. In our text for this morning, Zephaniah delivered a word that was either offensive ceremony, superficial ritual, or a most powerful faith. This is what he told them,

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your
heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the
judgments against you,
he has turned away your
enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in
your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

Surely the elders of the community gathered there in exile in Babylon, some with their blood pressure rising and others simply scratching their heads. How could Zephaniah say something like this when they were facing such destitution? Couldn't he see the suffering of the people? How could he taunt them with this joyful, hopeful message when their lives were filled with pain and misery?

Of course, from our vantage point, we know that Zephaniah's message was not offensive ceremony, though some may have perceived it to be. It wasn't superficial ritual either, though some may have thought that. Indeed, his message during some of Israel's darkest days issued from a powerful, transforming faith in Israel's God, who led them out of slavery in Egypt, who guided them through the wilderness, and who loved them with an everlasting love. From our vantage point, we know the end of the story, that God did bring those people home from Babylon and that there was loud singing and dancing and exultation. Their cups overflowed with gladness. The people of Israel were saved by a most powerful faith.

Now, here is the key to this text. When Zephaniah spoke these words, that salvation had not yet come to pass. They were still in Babylon. Home was a distant place and a distant memory. *What Zephaniah did was reach deep into the heart of their faith and ignite the fire of hope, and that hope in its time gave birth to joy.*

What is it that makes these times difficult for you? For most of us, it's not the big debate issues: the wars, health care, and the others. Those may give us something to argue about, but at the end of the day they're not the issues that sap our energy and make us want to avoid Christmas this year. No, our issues are much more personal, and they either drive us from our faith or to our faith. Some feel their blood pressure rising. Some simply scratch their head. But there are others of us who have been and are buoyed by the power of Christian faith. We know its power to ignite hope, even in the darkest of times. And we know the power of hope in its time to give birth to joy.

Many of the books I've read through the years I've long since forgotten. Thanks to my father who got me started on Louis L'Amour books, those are all one big story now. You've got bad guy, beautiful woman, and good guy. Guess who always gets the beautiful woman at the end? I've read so much theology and so many commentaries that if I could

remember it all I would be brilliant. Unfortunately, I've forgotten far more than I retained. But I do remember some of those books. I remember when I read them and the impact they had on me. *Man's Search for Meaning* by the Austrian medical doctor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl is one I will never forget. In a survey by the Book of the Month Club and the Library of Congress, it was selecteded as one of the ten most influential books in this country. It certainly was for me.

Frankl was in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. He was a highly trained psychoanalyst going through one of the most horrible experiences the human race has ever known, as awful as awful could be. He lost his wife, both parents, and all but one sibling in the camps. Six million people died in those gas chambers. Frankl survived and wrote about the human search for meaning based from what he had experienced. He watched the prisoners' reactions to the horrors of the death camp, knowing that so many people were dying, knowing that their family members were dying, and knowing that they too could be forced any day into one of the gas chambers. He observed some people were able to rise above it, remain charitable, hopeful, and even loving. Frankl concluded that the human search for meaning is not based entirely upon the conditions of one's life. Even deeper than that is a freedom no one can take away. It is the freedom we have to determine our response to those conditions. That deepest and final freedom, he said, is a function of our faith. That, he said, was what enabled some men to walk into those gas chambers with their heads held high, reciting either the Lord's Prayer or the *Shema*.

Here is a quote from *Man's Search for Meaning*:

> *We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*

You may think me to be a crazy man. That's okay. A sheer lunatic even. That's going a little too far! I'm just a crazy man who has the audacity to bear witness to what he has experienced. Like some of you, I've had to reach deep into the heart of our faith and take hold of that power.

And now I have a profound appreciation for a pink candle named Joy, the reading of a sacred text, a hug from someone who truly loves you, and the call to give away our bread. I've had to warm myself beside that fire called hope and wait. And in due time it gave birth to joy. I'm here to tell you that it will for you too. That is why we come to the manger to find joy.

Closing Prayer

Lord of hope, who causes the forlorn to sing aloud, the hopeless to rejoice in their heart, we need you as much as we need the air we breathe. Be hope for us. Be joy for us. Amen.